The International Reputation of Father Suitbert Mollinger
by Alexander J. Schrenk

Of all the great priestly characters of our diocese, Father Suitbert Mollinger’s legacy endures in an especially vibrant way. Few priests in Pittsburgh have served with as much resonance. While most parishes have a special regard for their founding pastor, Father Mollinger’s name is often spoken at Most Holy Name in Troy Hill with as much reverence as if he were still alive.

At the parish cemetery in Reserve, his granite monument on the top of the hill dominates all the others. Other pastors’ gravestones huddle around it, as if to offer testimony to the greatness of their predecessor. The rectory is another inescapable reminder of Father Mollinger. The son of Dutch nobility, he had the rectory constructed in a lavish European style in 1877. Trophies of his hunting prowess still decorate the walls of the dining room.

Of course, Father Mollinger’s greatest monument is St. Anthony’s Chapel. The little chapel in Troy Hill is well known as the largest collection of holy relics outside of the Vatican. It contains over five thousand pieces, from the skull of Saint Macarius of Jerusalem to a piece of the table of the Last Supper. All of these are housed within a veritable jewel box of gilt wood and painted plaster. Every Catholic grade-schooler in the North Hills takes at least one field trip to St. Anthony’s Chapel.

As a seminarian for the diocese, I had the opportunity this past year to serve at Saint Anthony’s Chapel as a tour guide. During this assignment, Father John Dinello, pastor of Most Holy Name Parish, and Carole Brueckner, chairperson of the Chapel Committee, asked me to do further historical research on Father Mollinger. Research results clearly indicated the extensive exposure that Father Mollinger received in his own time, how far his influence extended, and the reasons for his prominence.

The earliest source that deals with Father Mollinger dates from 1880. A History of the Catholic Church in the Dioceses of Pittsburg and Allegheny by Father Andrew Lambing, an early diocesan historian, describes Father Mollinger’s labors in establishing Most Holy Name Parish. Father Mollinger lived from 1828 to 1892, and his pastorate at Most Holy Name began in 1868; therefore, the 1880 source represents a contemporary viewpoint of the mark that Father Mollinger was leaving on the diocese.

Father Lambing’s focus in his History is to chronicle the establishment of parishes, rather than to provide character insights about pastors. It is noteworthy, then, that Father Lambing departs from providing a history of the parish in order to comment on Father Mollinger:

... Father Mollinger is in possession of a treasure deserving of special mention—the large number of sacred relics which he has brought together. The collection amounts to perhaps four thousand, and is arranged in order in a room specially prepared for its reception. ... [T]he collection may safely be said to be one of the largest and rarest in America, and few persons or institutions in the entire Christian world are permitted to congratulate themselves on the possession of such a treasure.3

Later in life, Father Mollinger attracted more attention from his apparently miraculous cures than from his impressive collection of relics. However, Father Lambing wrote in 1880, before the completion of even the first stage of St. Anthony’s Chapel. In all likelihood, Father Mollinger was already using his training as a physician to administer prescriptions to parishioners and possibly other people, but any such activity was evidently not prominent enough in 1880 to be known to Father Lambing.

By 1887, news of Father Mollinger’s proficiency as a healer had spread quite far. On May 19 of that year, the Irish Canadian reprinted an exhaustive, full-page story from the Philadelphia Times about “the miracle-worker of Troy Hill.” This article amounts to what we would call a personal interest story today, beginning with a personal history of Father Mollinger. His alluringly aristocratic family origins, along with his supposedly great personal wealth, made Father Mollinger a fascinating subject. The piece mentions the large collection of relics, and even details how Father was supposed to have acquired them: He would evidently make a large donation while visiting certain European monasteries and then demurely ask, “Have you, perhaps, a relic or two that might be spared for my chapel in America?”, which the abbot could never refuse.

A large part of the Irish Canadian article, however, is dedicated to describing the often miraculous cures that Father Mollinger performed on Troy Hill. The chapel is described as a “Mecca of endless processions of pilgrims, not alone from the cities of Pittsburg and Allegheny ... but also from neighboring States, and in many instances from far distant points.” In many cases, the article states, Father Mollinger would work the cures by ordinary means; for example, he paid for a poor Irish boy’s surgery from his own pocket. But the number of cases in which incurable maladies were cured with no medical explanation “runs up into the thousands.” Father Mollinger is reported to have healed the blind, cured the lame, and even delivered the possessed.

Even more interestingly, the article notes that miraculous cures have been “so common ... that they have ceased long ago to attract public attention here”—and “here” would have to mean Philadelphia, the place where the article was composed. Moreover, the cures had apparently been ongoing for fifteen years hence.4

1Though he was ethnically German, Father Mollinger’s father was supposedly the Prime Minister of the short-lived Kingdom of Holland.
2Lambing’s later 1914 work, Biographical Sketches, serves to provide the insight on the pastors.
4The question arises as to why Father Lambing would not have thought the cures worthy of note.
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The 1887 article marks what appears to be a period of rapidly increasing publicity for Father Mollinger. Every year afterward, an article appeared in a major newspaper detailing the miraculous cures of the priest from Pittsburgh. Predictably, these articles nearly all cluster in the months of June and July, in the aftermath of the Feast of Saint Anthony on June 13, the date that always marked the highest concentration of pilgrims to Troy Hill.

In June 1889, an article appeared in the Chicago Daily Tribune about the priest who "pretends to do no miracles," but, "having wonderful knowledge of medicine and human ills, prescribes and invokes God's and the Saint's [sic] all healing power to aid him."

A similar piece followed in the same newspaper the next year, noting that the Feast of Saint Anthony had attracted more than the usual amount of attention that year.

Perhaps because of the increased and further-flung media exposure, 1890 seems to mark an annum mirabilis for Father Mollinger. The following month, he received a biography in the Illustrated American, a periodical collection of notable persons from across the United States. Two months after that, on September 5, 1890, a full-page article appeared in the New Zealand Tablet, a Catholic newspaper on the other side of the world. They had reprinted the piece from the Catholic Sentinel of Oregon.

The New Zealand Tablet article is fascinating, not only because it establishes that Father Mollinger was truly internationally famous, but because of the specific information provided. The Catholic Sentinel had obtained a sizeable number of personal testimonies about the events of June 13, 1890 from the Pittsburg Catholic, which helped to illustrate the great distance from which pilgrims to Troy Hill were coming. Short interviews were done with Catholic pilgrims and non-Catholics alike, from as nearby as Lawrensville and as far away as Brooklyn, New York; Teutopolis, Illinois; and Savannah, Georgia. Father Mollinger had been so occupied with the number of pilgrims that he became ill from overwork. He had only just completed the patents to Father Mollinger's medicines and compounds.

By 1891, Father Mollinger must have been firmly established as a popular celebrity. No less notable a publication than the New York Times confirms this. In August of that year, it printed an article repudiating a rumor that Father Mollinger had been summoned to appear before the Holy Father in Rome. In addition to that report, the piece offers standard themes in articles about Father Mollinger: many were miraculously and instantaneously healed, he accepted no money for his services, and he always denied that the miracles were of his own working, as he was only a physician.

Even outside of religious circles, Father Mollinger had begun to attract attention. The Philadelphia Medical News published a piece in August which records the testimony of a skeptical Pittsburgh physician about Father Mollinger's faith cures. The Medical News casts a predictably disapproving light upon the activity on Troy Hill, noting that many were not cured, and that poor people often made a large personal sacrifice to appear before Father Mollinger. They do, however, concede that he had been a regularly licensed physician in Germany, and that, as he operated with the utmost sincerity, "he was not inclined to quackery."

From a nonreligious perspective, this might be deemed high praise.

Father Mollinger died on June 14, 1892, from an undetermined stomach ailment that was almost certainly brought on by the stress of the previous day's activities. He had only just completed the final stages of St. Anthony's Chapel, and celebrated the great feast day which had brought thousands to Troy Hill. An obituary was carried on June 16 in the New York Times, which called Father Mollinger "a remarkable man," and noted that his fame had been "international."

Popular opinion held that Father Mollinger was fabulously wealthy; in reality, he had spent nearly all of his fortune on constructing the reliquary chapel. For some months after his death, the New York Times and several Pittsburgh newspapers covered the drama of Father Mollinger's missing will. The sensationalist Pittsburgh Dispatch carried a story on June 22 that Bishop Phelan had found the missing will in the chapel's tabernacle, which fact had just nearly prevented the "invaluable yet valueless" relics from "falling into showmen's hands." By any other historical account, all elements of that story are false, but the story does illustrate the high degree of public interest in Father Mollinger's affairs at the time.

To provide a summary of newspaper coverage on Father Mollinger after his death would necessitate another article. After he died, a lengthy legal affair transpired concerning his personal property and the rights of his heirs, since he had in fact died intestate. From 1893 to 1894, more legal action ensued over the patents to Father Mollinger's medicines and compounds. Eventually, the U.S. Patent Office became involved in sorting out the business between three claimants who believed that the right to fill Father Mollinger's prescriptions had been theirs. Although this litigation had only ever been undertaken after Father Mollinger's death and therefore in no way directly involved him, it has, to some degree, led to a popular

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*No will was ever found, not even in the chapel's tabernacle.
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opinion that the priest was a quack doctor. Adding to this perception is a whole line of "Father Mollinger's Medicines" that appeared from North Side druggists in the mid-1910s. None of these cures have any direct relationship to Father Mollinger himself, but merely used his name and portrait to appeal to his revered memory.

There are two factors that contributed to Father Mollinger's popularity, a reputation that is demonstrably international. One was the priest's air of exotic nobility and, indeed, any European nobleman would have stood out in Pittsburgh in the 1890s. By all accounts, he had a striking appearance, being "of large and powerful frame, and the voice of Boanerges." Adding to the mystique of the miracle-worker of Troy Hill is the fact that he never granted personal interviews or commented on his cures. The Irish Canadian noted that "every attempt to draw out an explanatory interview has proved futile." The mystique of Father Mollinger's very person made him an interesting topic for the day's sensational brand of journalism, and word of the miracle-working priest soon spread all over the world.

The greatest factor, however, was the priest's indisputable ability to cure disease. One piece in particular notes that a single cured man from Louisville, Kentucky, brought a crowd of one hundred pilgrims to the chapel the next year. Whether he accomplished his cures by the medicines that he proscribed or by the faith of his patients is undeterminable. Even the doubtful Pittsburgh physician noted that Father Mollinger was "highly educated" and capable of healing by natural means alone. An educated Catholic would likely conclude that for most of the cures, grace and nature cooperated.

In 1914, Father Lambing completed his first volume of Short Biographical Sketches of the Deceased Bishops and Priests who Labored in the Diocese of Pittsburgh from the Earliest Times to the Present. In the six-page tribute to Father Mollinger, Father Lambing provides an expertly balanced summary of his subject. He expresses a reasonable degree of restraint in praising the priest's miracles, for although "that extraordinary cures were effected is beyond doubt," he concludes that it is impossible to differentiate in many cases what might be attributed to natural causes and what might be called supernatural intervention.

However, Father Lambing errs in his introduction, when he notes that "the memory of Rev. S. G. Mollinger, like that of many others, is rapidly passing into oblivion." In truth, Father Mollinger's legacy will endure as long as pilgrims continue to pass through the portals of Saint Anthony's Chapel on Troy Hill, whether they are seeking favors from the Almighty or appealing our primal attraction to the sacred. The Pittsburgh Diocese still enjoys the fruit of his great labors, and will continue to do so for the next century and beyond. Father Mollinger's name lives on.

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